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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 003747

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/19/2015

TAGS: PREL CO

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE SECRETARY'S VISIT TO COLOMBIA

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Introduction

11. (C) President Uribe and the embassy welcome the visit of
Secretary of State Rice with enthusiasm. Current hot topics

SIPDIS
include:

--U.S. support in out years

--Demobilization and reinsertion of almost 5,000 paramilitary
terrorists and several thousand more expected

--Extradition

--Growing concern about Venezuela

--Military progress and Plan Patriota

--Human rights

--Record-breaking drug eradication and seizures

--Status of U.S. hostages

--Free Trade Agreement negotiations

--Judicial reform

--Presidential re-election

U.S. Support

12. (C) Colombia faces a four front war -- narcotics, FARC, ELN,
paramilitaries -- and a growing concern about Venezuela. It
is fighting each of the fronts with a slightly different mix
of political, military, and police measures, all of which are
expensive and at times controversial. The GOC will be
looking for private and public reaffirmations of sustained
U.S. support, including financial support. Requested U.S.
assistance tops \$556 million in FY06, plus a number of other
agency operating accounts, continuing the steady decline from
about \$602 million in FY03. The Colombian security forces
face serious helicopter shortages for counter-drug and
counter-terrorism operations and struggle to afford
maintenance, pilot training, and other support. President
Uribe and Defense Minister Jorge Uribe (no relation) may ask
for additional Blackhawk helicopters.

Demobilization and Reinsertion

13. (C) The GOC may request U.S. aid for the demobilization
and reinsertion process for the paramilitaries. President
Uribe raised the issue with the President and Secretary
Powell more than once. Although you have stated our public
support for the program, after 18 months we are still
awaiting a DOJ decision that would make aid legal under the
Patriot Act. In the meantime, the GOC program reflects the
lack of U.S. input.

14. (C) Since 2003, 5,000 paramilitaries (AUC) have
demobilized and another 7,000 from all groups have deserted.
Several thousand more may demobilize this year. But they
have no place to go. The program is under-funded and the OAS
verification chief has issued an international call for help.
Although some Europeans are providing bilateral assistance,
the EU refuses to help, partly at the behest of NGOs, until
an "acceptable" law of Peace and Justice, which provides
lesser sentences to demobilized persons guilty of major
crimes, is approved. The controversial law has passed in
committee and is awaiting plenary debate. We expect adoption
by the end of June.

15. (C) In a related peace process, the ELN rejected Mexican
facilitation on April 18, ostensibly over the GOM's vote
against Cuba at the UN Commission on Human Rights. We

believe that the FARC influenced the ELN to end the talks and that the ELN will engage in "forum shopping" to find a more pliable facilitator. The FARC has steadily refused peace talks or an acceptable humanitarian prisoner exchange.

Extradition

16. (C) President Uribe has approved 214 extraditions to the U.S. since taking office. He will likely ask for more coordination to conform our actions to Colombian legal requirements relating to length of sentence and other political sensitivities. He has resisted both corrupt and honestly nationalistic attempts to curtail extraditions, including in the peace process with the paramilitaries. But we need to reaffirm our adherence to commitments to Colombia, and follow through.

Venezuela

17. (C) Colombia-Venezuela relations deteriorated further after FARC international spokesman Rodrigo Granda was captured in Caracas. You should encourage regional counter-terror and counter-drug cooperation, a major theme of last month's summit among Presidents Chavez, Lula, Zapatero, and Uribe. Colombia remains concerned about Venezuela's arms build-up, and is tempted to divert needed resources away from counter-drug and counter-terror priorities. Colombia has proposed a closer bilateral defense relationship as a partial solution; Doug Feith leads a team in early May that will discuss the issue.

Military Progress and Plan Patriota

18. (C) Plan Patriota, the campaign to re-take national territory from illegal armed groups, is in its third year and focused in FARC-dominated, heavily forested southeastern Colombia. Phase One largely restored security to the Bogota area. The logistical strain of keeping 15,500 troops in deep, hostile jungle has been a huge challenge; the troops have suffered casualties from both FARC action and disease. But they are winning. FARC violence in the first quarter of 2005, although tactically aggressive, remained localized. We believe it was calculated, at least in part, to divert scarce Colombian resources away from Plan Patriota.

Human Rights

19. (C) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress in human rights, but needs to do more to ensure accountability, strengthen the military justice system, break military ties to paramilitary groups, and end corruption. You should stress in private the crucial need for the GOC to investigate and prosecute crimes in which the military may have been directly or indirectly involved. However, the vast majority of human rights crimes are attributable to the illegal armed groups; e.g., in the second week of April 300 FARC attacked an Indian village, killing a number of civilians and local police. The government has a difficult but active dialogue with NGOs, the United Nations, and foreign governments. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police. The Embassy vets all units that receive U.S. assistance, in accordance with the Leahy Amendment. In 2004, homicides fell by 16 percent, kidnappings by 42 percent, and forced displacements by 37 percent.

Drug Eradication/Interdiction

10. (C) Cooperation with Colombia remains excellent, complicated at times by the competition for scarce helicopters between the counter-terror and counter-drug priorities. Eradication and interdiction are at record levels. Some 60,500 hectares of coca and 900 hectares of opium poppy had been sprayed since the beginning of the year and 1,300 hectares of coca and poppy were manually eradicated. In 2004, over 136,000 hectares of coca and 3,000 hectares of poppy were sprayed, and almost 200 metric tons of cocaine and cocaine base were seized inside Colombia. Ground fire against spray planes is below 2003 levels but remains problematic.

U.S. Hostages

11. (C) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 are now the longest U.S. terror captives in the world. Their safe release continues to be one of our top priorities. The Colombians are providing full assistance.

They have assured us that our hostages will be included in any humanitarian exchange and have done their best to avoid military operations that might unnecessarily jeopardize the hostages.

Free Trade Agreement/Economy

¶12. (U) The ninth round of FTA talks began on April 18 in Lima, Peru. President Uribe remains a strong proponent. The Colombians are concerned that their congressional and national elections in 2006 will block approval if agreement waits too long. Agriculture continues to be a major issue. Our goal of conclusion by early 2005 is uncertain.

¶13. (U) Overall economic growth continues to be strong (about 4 percent), investment is growing, and unemployment is falling. But Uribe faces fiscal and political pressure from the competition between defense and social needs.

Judicial Reform

¶14. (C) The U.S.-backed switch to an oral trial system has been successful. The Colombian military justice system, however, is unreformed, giving rise to justified accusations of impunity in selected cases. Last month, the military submitted a "shock" reform package to Congress as the first step towards streamlining military justice. You should press for more rapid, effective progress, especially in a few critical cases.

Presidential Reelection

¶15. (C) Congressional elections will take place next March; presidential elections next May. Constitutional reform to permit Uribe's re-election has been approved by Congress but faces review by the Constitutional Court; the outcome is uncertain. Uribe is above 65 percent approval in polls. Re-election and the Peace and Justice Law are the two big political issues at present.

WOOD